

CHRISTMAS CAROLS WE HAVE LOVED

Part 4: O Holy Night!

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Introduction

*I can't get enough of those Christmas songs,
Christmas songs, Christmas songs
I can't get enough of those Christmas songs,
I hear them everywhere I go.
(to the tune of the Sugar Crisp jingle)*

In the midst of all the shopping — we pay for gifts, we pay for sales tax, we pay for wrapping paper, we pay for ribbons and bows and tags, we pay for postage and shipping, we pay for trees and decorations — but does anyone *pay attention?! What is it we are all singing about?*

Concluding our four-part series today, we'll consider the history and meaning of one of our favorite Christmas carols, to shed fresh light on the grandest Story of all time.

Background

Placide Cappeau (1808-1877), a French wine merchant and poet, was asked by his parish priest in 1847 to write a Christmas poem, which he did, by the title "Minuit, chrétiens, c'est l'heure solennelle." Desiring music to accompany its three stanzas, Cappeau approached his friend, Adolphe Adam, a well-known composer. Thus, "O Holy Night" ("Cantique de Noël") was born.

In just eight years it was translated into English by Unitarian minister John Sullivan Dwight, editor of Dwight's Journal of Music.

Fifty-one years later, on December 24, 1906, Reginald Fessenden, a Canadian inventor, broadcast the first AM radio program, which included him playing "O Holy Night" on the violin. The carol therefore appears to have the distinction of being the first piece of music to be broadcast on radio. It has been recorded by hundreds of artists — from Country to Opera. The styles of music may vary greatly, but if you listen, the wonder and the worship always shine through.

Dawn of Hope

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

The first verse portrays the depth of universal misery due to sin, and the near-forgotten hope of a Deliverer.

Romans 8:22 We know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.²³ And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering.

All of the misery you see in our world — from poverty and famine to wars and corruption — is the result, directly or indirectly of sin in the human race. And our every rationalization — from a white lie to an act of expedience — merely buries the seed of a sin more devastating.

Jesus explained:

Mark 7:20 "It is what comes from inside that defiles you."²¹ For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you."

Left to ourselves, entropy, collapse, destruction, perishing would be our final demise. We do not, as a race, grow better by nature, we grow more clever. We do not grow more kind, but more measured in our acts of kindness.

Sin is crafty, insidious, deadly. Humanity needs a new birth!

Jesus came to reveal the sinfulness of sin, and He to say, *"Don't be surprised when I tell you that you must be born again."* (John 3:7)

So, into this darkness of night shone the stars of heaven, like ten thousand birthday celebration candles, and this night, because of the birth of the promised Savior, became a holy night.

There can be only one appropriate response, whether actual or figurative:

*Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!*

The angels sang and the shepherds knelt to worship. The stars shone and the wise men knelt to offer their gifts of surrender.

Everyone has fallen in sin — yielding to temptations unrelenting — but have you ever bowed yourself down in grateful worship of the Savior Jesus, the Hope of the world?

He invites, *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."* (Matthew 11:28-30)

Wise Men Still Seek Him

*Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the wise men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend!*

Verse two depicts a journey — parallel journeys, really. The wise men’s search for Him who was born King of the Jews and King of kings, was a precursor to the journeys of every person who follows the light of faith. And both, diligently followed, lead to the same place, the same conclusion, the same discovery: the child who was born to Mary and slept in a manger — a cattle trough — was the great King, the Messiah, born in utter humility, born to rule in love and justice, born to be our truest Friend.

Jesus confided in His disciples:

“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid.” (John 14:27)

“I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

He knows our need—to our weakness is no stranger.

Behold your King; before Him lowly bend!

Behold your King; before Him lowly bend!

Hebrews 4:15 This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

To the One so kind, so true, we should give our highest allegiance, our deepest reliance. We cannot give more; He deserves no less.

Deliverer

Truly He taught us to love one another;

His law is love and His Gospel is peace.

Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother

And in His Name all oppression shall cease.

Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,

Let all within us praise His holy Name!

The marvel of the Gospel — the Good News about Jesus — is that it works; it really works! It is neither “pie in the sky, by and by” nor religious ritualism. It is the personal transformation that results from faith properly placed in the person of Jesus; He changes our nature!

Things we used to despise, we begin to love. Things we once craved, we begin to dismiss. Truly, Jesus teaches us to love one another, despite differences of culture, language, learning, economics, politics, or religious distinctions.

Christianity is not, as has been proposed, a sanctuary for slavery or a means of oppression and mind control. Real faith is liberating! True Christianity establishes genuine peace between former enemies, turning swords into plowshares.

Even down to the too oft-covered psychological games of one-upmanship and rude competition that take place in families, Christ has come to break our chains of meanness and replace them with sweet joy and glorious praise.

*Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!*

We have a job to do! Our task is to make His glory known. To declare the wonders of His name. To demonstrate the works of His power.

What shall we do now? What are we to take away from this message?

1. HOPE. True hope has dawned. Embrace it. Let your fears be swallowed up in the love of Christ.
2. WORSHIP. Jesus Christ alone deserves your hearts complete attention and response. Present your life to Him and give Him your praises.
3. FREEDOM. Your faith in Christ is a source of perpetual deliverance from every sort of bondage, no matter how deep its hold on your life. Yield to Him and practice His ways and great peace will be yours.